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Affect - an ethnocentric encounter?: exploring the ‘universalist’ imperative of emotional/ affectual geographies

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Within international fora (e.g. AAG 2005¹) and in publications, we are made aware that *affect* and *emotion* operate on different political landscapes. Although both ‘affectual’ and ‘emotional geographies’ attempt to attend to the intractable silence of emotions in social research and public life (Anderson and Smith, 2001), the field of ‘emotional’ geographies is the location of the recovery work that embraces embodied experience and the political materialities that resonate from and that are formed through emotions. The value of an affectual approach over writing through emotion is often intangible and immeasurable, yet these two fields are simultaneously conjoined and separate because of their subject matter, language, their political vision and genealogies. ‘Emotional Geographies’ (Anderson and Smith 2001, Davidson and Bondi 2004) however, assert a space for feminist politics, race and difference, and I would argue that this is because embedded in this intervention is a memory of social theories of difference, namely those that are embodied in a feminist critique of modernity and its legacy. The difference between this plane of enquiry and the research on affect, is that *affect* reflects a distillation of embodied experience to geometric modes and textures of feeling. Emotion is relegated to *immediacy*, *immanence* and the *virtual* in the everyday lived environment; intrinsically embedded in universalist thought rather than the geopolitical landscape that constitutes our universal political life. I argue here that a sensitivity to ‘power geometries’ is vital to any individuals’ capacity to affect and be affective.

¹ *Geographies of Affect* session organized by John-David Dewsbury and Jennifer Lea (Bristol University) at the Annual, ‘Association of American Geographers Conference’, April 2005, held in Denver, Colorado.

Politically, writers such as McCormack (2003) identify the difficulties in an ethical project *against* representation. McCormack is keen to embrace the need to understand how “apprehending the power of ‘interest’ is always as much a question of visceral sensibility as it is a question of situating the habitual practices of the everyday in relation to wider discursive and / or political economies. The habitual economies of the everyday are not simply the matter upon which power works. They are power in themselves” (2003, 490). This is an imaginative and valuable project. However, one that would be enriched by a consideration of the multiplicities and complexities of affectual registers and flows. A new theorisation *against* a universalist sensibility, which is embedded in the historical practice of social theory that is enriching. Affective economies are defined and circulate through and within historical notions of the political, social and cultural capacities of various bodies as *signified* rather than those specifically encountered, felt, loved, loathed and sensed (Ahmed 2004a). This commentary is a call for recognising the (historicist) memory and vitality of an anti-universalism that multiplies the sites and encounters possible in this enlivening field of research that is ‘affectual/ emotional’ geographies. This move does not need to be burdened by representational theories *per se* but acknowledge that affective capacities of any body are signified unequally within social spaces of being and feeling; any engagement with affective economies and capacities of being, thus require a sensitive touch.

Any political orientation towards ‘intensities of feeling’, should be sensitive to power geometries and ultimately challenge “anaemic knowledges” (Anderson and Smith 2001,

9). Occlusions of matrices of power, result in an universalist and ethnocentric theorisations. The dangers of universalism are mirrored in political rhetoric of neo-conservatism, post 9/11. In this period we have endured metonymical slippages in provocative pronouncements of what ‘others’ and ‘terrorists’ are. These slippages are where a universal figure of ‘non-patriot’, ‘bomber’ and ‘Muslim cleric’ supports a climate of fear and loathing of any number of bodies, that do not slip back into being figures of acceptable, loveable citizen (Ahmed, 2004a; Ahmed, 2004b). When this figure is universally identified, this body is disorientated and unmappable; ‘it becomes difficult to locate, situate, personify and identify’ (Ahmed 2004a, quoting Weber, 135). This lack of specificity denies the fact of our myriad abilities to move, be feared, loved and hated within the social sphere into a world where universal types are operative and the legacy of cultural theory has been lost. To counter these universalist imperatives in the theories of affect it is important to consider the literary cornerstones of Thrift’s own manifesto.

Affect, Spinoza and the scale of the univers(al)

Thrifts’ (2004) account enables us to explore and register relationships between material, lived environments and the emotional processes that shape space and materially configure the dynamics of encounter within and through them. It is significant that there are a *singularity* of registers of affect and emotion, that are declared in this extremely important call. Thrifts’ productive intervention requires some stretching beyond its universalist approach. This criticism, although not new criticism (Nash, 2000), is one that is embedded in an understanding of the registers of emotion as singular, within a ‘transhuman’ conception of the world that is an(ti)-historicist and essentially

ethnocentric. This new ‘politics of affect’ encourages us to proceed with an orientation through which the world can be felt, known and understood and expressed, inevitably through *text*. This restriction to the textual is in itself problematic, and is contrary to the imperatives of a theoretical politics that is concerned with the registers of emotion and embodied practice.

One problematic of this *textual* encounter is that the pivotal cornerstones of this theory are based on a westnocentric literary and sensory palette. Thrift acknowledges that his political call “risks ethnocentrism in an area which, more than most, has been aware of difference” (2004, 59). This is not a wholly responsible caveat in a post-modern social world of difference and as a result an exponentially expanding cultural theory. Issues of power and difference that reverberate through the materiality, through which affective capacities are figured, shaped and expressed are occluded here. To put this simply, affective registers have to be understood in the context of multiple power geometries that shape our social space; different bodies have different affective capacities. Various bodies through their racialised, gendered and sexualised markedness, magnetise various capacities for being affected; a slave and holocaust victim do not necessarily experience pain, suffering, anomie, in the same way due to their social positioning and ‘enforced’ capacities of (im)mobility, experience and affecting the social space around them. As Gilroy (2000) states, racial hierarchies continue to exist and thus influence the material ways in which marked bodies shape modern social space, thus assuring the different capacities, rhythms and resistances afforded them. A body that is not signified as a source of fear, through its markedness, cannot be free to affect and be affected similarly to one

that is not. Collectivities of affect are engendered, shaped and empowered through visual and social registers. A contextual node of understanding 'pain' 'fear' 'anger' and 'loss' in relation to these geometries of difference is essential to effect an embodied theorisation of affect and emotion. To explain further I will draw on Deleuze's (1988) conceptualisation of affective capacity.

Deleuze (1988) writing on Spinoza has been one of the cornerstones of current geographical forging of theories of affect. In his (Spinoza's) concept of the individual in a singular (transhuman) nature "What is involved is no longer the affirmation of a single substance, but rather a laying out of a *common plane of immanence* on which all bodies, all minds, and all individuals are situated." (1988, 125) This modal plane allows a sense of being that is a geometric positioning, one defined by latitude and longitude. On this plane "There is no longer a form, but only relations of velocity between infinitesimal particles of an unformed material. There is no longer a subject, but only individuating affective states of anonymous force. Here the plan is concerned only with motions and rests, with dynamic affective charges" (ibid; 128) This description bounds us to think on the scale of the universe(al); forces and movements are upon matter and in this scale materials of organic, inorganic collective and individual are bound via one singular plane. On the scale of the individual, the logic of this universalism is extended to deny the forces of differential positionings that are not simply physical capacities for movement, feeling or being, instead a possibility of understanding variances of mass (physically and powerfully) amongst this scale of the individual human the only differentials are defined through an understanding of 'body' as equalised through a geometric and physical

relationship. For example a “body affects other bodies, or it is affected by other bodies; it is this capacity for affecting and being affected that also defines a body individually” (p?) A body can be figured as a collective group or indeed as a singular piece of music, in Deluze’s interpretation, yet, the ways in which these collectivities are differently capable of affecting and being affected because of their access to social/geopolitical power, identifications through others’ affective strategies for ‘hate’ and or ‘love’ is not engaged with. In this politics of affect, what is needed is an attentiveness to the various sensory modes of being, resulting from varied capacities to be affective. Gilroy, reflecting on the political project of bridging tensions between ‘essentialist identity’ a project of ‘planetary humanism’ argues that “We (also) need to consider how a deliberate engagement with the twentieth century’s histories of suffering might furnish resources for the peaceful accommodation of otherness in relation to fundamental commonality” (Gilroy 2004, 3). Although Gilroy’s project is *humanist*, his call for a historical sensitivity to affectual regimes of experience and rule can be applied beyond the human; the inorganic and organic do not require separate spheres of historical memory here. By acknowledging power geometries of our present as linked to our pasts, we can make complex the parameters and flows of affectual capacities and sensitivities which course through everyday life.

In recent writing in cultural geography the power of spatial politics are pivotal to the materialising of particular geographies that reduce material encounters to categories of ‘race’, ‘gender’ and ‘sexuality’ (Saad and Carter, 2005). Also writing on ‘whiteness’ (Bonnett 1996; 1997; 2000) has been central to thinking through assumed racial

universalisms that exist in visually dialogic media that shape our world (Dyer 1997).

Sarah Neal (2002) also argues for *varied racisms* as experienced by ethnic groups in the British countryside. Emotional/ affectual geographies are therefore not experienced on singular, tangible and measureable registers of emotion. It is thus critical to think plurally about the capacities for affecting and being affected, and for this theorisation to engage with the notion that various individual capacities are differently forged, restrained, trained and embodied. One set of writings that have argued this has been that on race and racisms (Gilroy 1987;1993, Goldberg, 1993, Hall 1990; 1996; 1997, Hall and du Gay, 1996, Solomos, 1993, Solomos and Back, 1995) which have ultimately been figured through various nodes of 'hate' and 'love'.

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